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SUBJECT: RULING AK PARTY, OPPOSITION CHP, AND WOMEN'S
GROUPS GRAPPLE WITH GENDER EQUALITY

REF: ANKARA 2425

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (U) Summary: MPs from ruling AK Party clashed with the opposition CHP and women's rights advocates in debates over a constitutional amendment on gender equality. Parliament adopted an AKP measure with expanded language on the equal rights of men and women, while rejecting a CHP proposal supporting "temporary measures" to ensure equality. AKP's opponents say the party's stand reflects a backward view of the role of women in society; AKP MPs counter that the proposed CHP language was inappropriate for the Constitution, and accuse opponents of using the issue for political gain. End Summary.

40 Women's Groups Attend Debate

2. (U) In parliamentary debates May 4 and 7, AKP MPs clashed with CHP and women's rights organizations over what wording should be added to strengthen Article 10 of the Constitution, which, in its current form, states broadly that all individuals are equal before the law without regard to gender, language, race, political/philosophical beliefs, or religion. The amendment to Article 10 is part of a broader package of constitutional reforms (reftel) that Parliament adopted May 7.

3. (U) The parliamentary Constitutional Committee April 30 approved an amendment adding two sentences to Article 10: "Men and women shall enjoy equal rights. The State has the duty to ensure that this equality is put into practice." However, when the constitutional package was debated in the full Parliament May 4 and 7, CHP MPs, backed by representatives of 40 women's organizations attending the sessions, argued the amendments did not go far enough to ensure gender equality. CHP proposed a further addition stating that "temporary measures" adopted for the purpose of ensuring gender equality "cannot be considered discrimination or privilege," wording borrowed from the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. However, AKP MPs rejected the CHP proposal and Parliament adopted the version approved in committee.

Women's Groups Disappointed

4. (U) Nazik Isik, a member of both the Women's Solidarity Foundation and CHP, and Halime Guner, president of the elitist women's rights organization Flying Broom, acknowledged to us that the adopted amendment is an improvement, but averred that the proposed CHP language was needed to ensure that the State takes an active role in promoting gender equality. Isik said the biggest problem for Turkish women is not the law itself, but how and whether the law is implemented. By inserting a reference to "temporary measures," Parliament could have made it clear that certain actions are required to overcome the effects of past discrimination. Isik opined that the specific "temporary measures" required would vary. Quotas would be needed to ensure women are appropriately represented in politics, while in the private sector employers should be encouraged to favor women when reviewing job applicants with equal qualifications.

AK MP: CHP Proposal Inappropriate

15. (U) However, Nimet Cubukcu, an AKP MP closely involved in the debate, told us it would be inappropriate to refer to "temporary measures" in the Constitution. She said she supports the use of quotas and other gender equality measures in certain cases, and noted that Article 10 does not prohibit such practices -- in fact, CHP already employs quotas for certain party organs. But Article 10 is a permanent statement on the equal rights of Turkish citizens -- references to "temporary measures" belong in regulations, not the Constitution.

Mutual Accusations of "Playing Politics"

16. (C) Women's rights advocates assert that AKP's rejection of the more activist wording on gender equality reflects the retrograde view of an Islam-influenced party toward the role of women in society. "A big portion of AKP is very backward on this issue. They are not all 'conservative democrats,'" said Isik, in mocking reference to PM Erdogan's oft-stated description of the party. While all of Turkey's political parties fall short in terms of equality between men and women, there is a genuine difference between CHP and AKP -- CHP wants "to promote progress" and AKP wants "to preserve the status quo," Isik averred. She claimed that even some Islam-oriented women's organizations oppose AKP for this reason. Cubukcu, however, rejects the charge against AKP. She accused the women's organizations (which everyone accepts as being concentrated on the elitist "secular" left of the Turkish political spectrum and of being too engaged in ideological debate rather than concrete, grass-roots action) of using the constitutional amendment to wage a political attack. AKP is no weaker on gender equality than any other Turkish party, she declared; if CHP were sincerely interested in women's rights, it would field more women candidates.

17. (C) Flying Broom's Guner shares the mistrust of AKP on women's issues, but accuses both parties of placing politics above gender equality. She said women's rights advocates were shocked and angered when Cubukcu -- normally a strong, independent-minded supporter of gender equality within AKP -- opposed the CHP proposals in Parliament. Like Isik, Guner told us rumor has it that Cubukcu decided to toe the party line because she wants to be selected in an upcoming Cabinet re-shuffle to replace Guldal Aksit as State Minister in charge of women's affairs. At the same time, however, CHP MPs seemed to want AKP to block their proposals so they could score political points, Guner said. For example, Oya Arasli, a female CHP deputy who was expected to play a key role in the debate, spoke for 20 minutes on the overall constitutional package and devoted only 3-4 minutes to the gender equality issue. "There are only so many opportunities to amend the Constitution," Guner said. "They wasted it on a political fight, and now the opportunity is lost."

Comment

18. (C) Despite adopting a wide range of legal reforms in pursuit of EU membership, AKP has not embraced Western concepts of gender equality, and the skeptical women's rights movement remains distrustful. At the same time, however, on this and other issues CHP has blindly sought to oppose AKP without emerging as a legitimate political alternative or check on the ruling party's power. Ultimately, amending the wording of Article 10 will have little impact on gender equality. The Constitution already declares men and women equal; making equality a reality will require profound, long-term changes in mentality as much as in practice.
EDELMAN